

Balance Wheel

Presidents Should Use Their Moral Authority to Protect Academe

STEPHEN J. NELSON

The American college and university presidency is bone-wearying, if not bone-crushing, in its demands. It is not only the focal point of individual campus leadership, but indeed the shaper of higher education in America.

Maybe today's college presidents are more, as former Emory University President Jim Laney puts it, *primus inter pares*, than the "no equal in the world" of Charles Eliot's day. But even if only "first among equals" (and arguably they are more than that) today's presidents are leaders who know the buck does stop with them (though some may try to shirk that responsibility), who gain their high office in all but a few isolated instances by rigorous assessments of proven capabilities and fulfilled expectations, and who possess important bully pulpits in the eyes of both campus and society.

For all the comparisons with corporate CEOs, some on the mark, some off, the job of president in the academy is vastly more complex, demanding and relentlessly pressured from an almost unending stream of physical, financial and human resource dilemmas, from diverse constituencies with competing interests, from small and large debates—and from the expectation that the president consult, adhere to democratic process and commit to rational discourse.

Carleton College President Rob Oden tells the story of a counterpart of his who hailed from the corporate sector commenting that the difference between the corporate world and the academy was that "We make snap decisions in business, and then mop up the agony for six months. In the academy, you have a process that seems agonizing for six months, and then the decision is reached." Oden rightfully concludes that "it's a lot of process anyway," and that is itself a marked difference and a different reality for leadership.

George Washington University President Stephen Trachtenberg describes his role as "constantly searching for equilibrium," perceiving himself "as a balance wheel in an institution which has strong passions, made up of individuals who wish to steer it in any one of various worthwhile and even noble directions." That's certainly not a description of the average corporate CEO. In a

similar vein, he notes "my passion is to allow all those passions to play out in the name of a healthier academic community, but also in a healthier society in general."

But the most distinct aspect of the college presidency and one on which many observers tend to focus is the perception that presidents possess—and should use—their bully pulpits. *How* they use their perches—and the degree to which they exercise moral voice from them—trips alarm bells in and out of the academy.

At least two major dangers can prevent presidents from speaking out on issues of the day. The first, and most obvious, is the relentless fundraising pressure on presidents—the era of the seemingly continuous capital "campaign"—and the degree to which fear of losing major donors makes presidents reticent about what they say and how they might be quoted, especially on "hot button" issues. Most presidents acknowledge the practical reality that they will err on the side of caution and nuance what they have to say, wisely avoiding utterances that might offend major donors and prospects.

This pressure may be more myth than reality, but it still makes presidents wary. No less visible an academic leader than former Brown University President Vartan Gregorian, commenting about the "tact and diplomacy" required of presidents, quotes Lord Chesterfield that "wisdom is like carrying a watch. Unless asked, you don't have to tell everybody what time it is."

Moreover, there are occasional reported episodes of colleges refusing gifts because of an overt or implied quid pro quo.

Johnnetta Cole, the former president of Spelman College who came out of "retirement" to lead the struggling Bennett College, acknowledges that to maintain a campus environment open to divergent views, a president "must temper, set boundaries ... as to what you say." Despite this caution, Cole is constantly outspoken inside and outside the gates of the campuses she has served. Likewise, Nan Keohane, the recently retired president of Duke, maintained a vigorous bully pulpit, speaking out on national issues such as intercollegiate athletics and the role of sweatshops in manufacturing university wear. Keohane involved herself and Duke in a regional farm workers' rights controversy, all the while conducting a highly successful billion-dollar plus

campaign. Former Harvard President Neil Rudenstine made it a practice to get out in front of controversial issues, especially in talks with alumni. As president, he intentionally opened discussion on issues he knew his audience might be thinking or intending to bring up. And he did this throughout the time he was securing enormous gifts from Harvard alumni. So, there may be a fair bit of talk about how fundraising pressure constrains the moral utterances of presidents, but this by itself, does not prevent presidents from speaking out publicly.

The most distinct aspect of the college presidency and one on which many observers tend to focus is the perception that presidents possess—and should use—their bully pulpits.

But a second danger lurks. The ideological battleground of political correctness is an invidious problem for presidential moral voice, and even more significantly, for the university itself.

Presidents, seeking rightly to defend the turf of the university from the likes of Bill Bennett, David Horowitz, Alan Bloom and so many others (generally on the Right), become instant allies of the numerous “progressive” academics (generally on the Left) who would use the university to accomplish overt and covert social and political goals. In so doing, they ironically confirm the critiques that the Right trumpets in the public square about the diminished objectivity and compromised seeking of truth in academia. At the same time, faculty set on pushing political agendas unintentionally undermine the principles of free and open inquiry, search for truth, debate and dialogue—the very hallmarks of the university that presidents should be willing to protect regardless of whom they cross in the process.

New York University President John Sexton addressed these dangers in a talk, entitled, “The University as Sanctuary,” which he delivered at Fordham earlier this year. Sexton enters the heart of the political correctness debate, decrying the “powerful evidence that the quality of dialogue in much of our society increasingly is

impoverished—that, just when there is a need for more nuanced reflection and discussion, civil discourse seems ever less able to deliver it.”

Sexton concludes that “it is ironic that at the time when sustaining the university as sanctuary is so important to society at large, society itself has unleashed forces which threaten the vitality if not the existence of that sacred space. Simply put, the polarization and oversimplification of civic discourse have been accompanied by a simultaneous attempt to capture the space inside the university for the external battle. This trend does not arise from one political side or another, but from a tendency to enlist the university not for its wisdom but for its symbolic value as a vehicle to ratify a received vision.”

What can and should presidents do in the face of this threat? One reasonable conclusion is that they must steer a middle course in the ideological battleground. Some might find such an approach too tentative, further comprising the presidents’ bully pulpits. But Trachtenberg’s “balance wheel” is actually a crucial location of the moral courage of presidents. It is where their moral authority is most needed, especially in times that are substantively different from those of the always-talked-about “giants” of previous and bygone eras with whom they are at times fairly, but in this case unfairly, compared. It is a task no less important than preventing the muzzling of the true voices of the academy and thereby the academy itself. They need to be voices ensuring that the university not be turned into something used “for its symbolic value as a vehicle to ratify a received vision.” In short, presidents are called upon to do nothing less than use their voices and their pulpits to let the university be the university.

Stephen J. Nelson is a research associate in the Brown University Education Department and an assistant professor in educational leadership at Bridgewater State College. Nelson is the author of Leaders in the Crucible: The Moral Voice of College Presidents. He is currently completing a Kellogg Foundation project featuring interviews with 15 current and former college presidents.

The Making of the College President

Average years in office: 7

Gender: 79% male, 21% female

Race/ethnicity: 87% white, 6% African-American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Asian-American, 1% American Indian

Percentage who have held full-time faculty positions: 70%

Percentage whose most recent previous job was in private business: 2%

Percentage whose most recent previous job was in government: 2%

Source: The American College President, 2002 Edition, American Council on Education



Profiles in Caution

If College Presidents Don't Ask Questions about War and Civil Liberties, Who Will?

MARGARET A. MCKENNA

The college campus is the natural place for open, lively debate on the important issues of the day. Robust public discourse is elemental to what higher education is all about. But what is the role of college presidents in that debate? Is it limited to merely ensuring an environment in which diverse points of view are welcomed and expressed? Or do we also have a responsibility to participate actively in the freewheeling exchange of ideas, even, on occasion, taking sides on significant issues of controversy?

The answer is not simply a matter of each president's individual tolerance—or appetite—for controversy. It goes to the heart of how we define our jobs. I believe my principal responsibility as president of Lesley University is running the place and fundraising, but the charge goes beyond that. Sometimes it also means taking a stand and speaking out.

At a recent discussion I participated in for college leaders on the "President's Role in Public Discourse," circumspection was the order of the day. My suggestion that institutional leaders have a responsibility to speak out on critical public issues provoked a strong negative response from many of the college leaders in the room.

Men and women who in their day-to-day campus decision-making and community affairs are by no means timid, unimaginative or un-opinionated, found plenty of reasons to counsel caution in dealing with broader public affairs: *If we take a stand, we will offend some people. Taking a public stand would put the campus at risk.*

It's one thing to speak out on "safe" topics like proposed changes to the federal Higher Education Act and the attendant dangers of government intrusions into the academic sphere. But what voice should we give to the abridgement of individual civil liberties under the USA Patriot Act? What about gay marriage, abortion, Enron, tax policy and health reform?

If college presidents don't ask questions about war and civil liberties, who will? If we don't speak out on such issues and act as role models for our students,

who will? Many academic leaders take the position that anything that has the potential to alienate some constituency, by definition, poses risk to the institution and should be avoided. I disagree.

One of higher education's fundamental roles is to encourage students to become actively involved in the community—in civic life. Isn't it logical then for students to expect leaders of their institutions to model that behavior? That suggests that presidents must act not only as academic leaders, but as moral leaders of the broader community as well. Doing so is fundamental to making students' educational experience—and our institutions themselves—relevant in today's world.

In an earlier era, campus leaders frequently occupied positions of societal power and influence. Think of James Bryant Conant's influence on American life that extended well beyond Harvard's walls to science policy and education reform, Yale President Kingman Brewster's challenge to the establishment's support of the Vietnam War, and the eloquent leadership of Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays against segregation.

Colleges and universities require certain basics to deliver high-quality education to students—basics like strong faculty, coherent curriculum, classrooms and student services. In the final analysis, though, it will not be just the subject knowledge and skills that our graduates leave college with that matters. It will also be the values they take away to lead lives as productive citizens. Every campus leader, by virtue of his or her position, has the capacity (and I believe, the obligation) to influence those values by example through words and deeds.

Will this occasionally get us into trouble? Perhaps so. But remember that Nelson Mandela's birth name in his tribal language means "troublemaker" or "shaker of trees." In times like these, we need all the tree shakers we can muster. At a recent Lesley University commencement, keynote speaker John Lewis, the civil rights icon and congressman from Georgia, exhorted the 3,000 members of the graduating class to "make trouble and get in the way." That is good advice for our students. It is good advice for academic leaders as well.

Margaret A. McKenna is president of Lesley University.

It's Not About Me

Politics of the Public University President

RICHARD PATTENAUDE



One hears the occasional lament that university presidents do not speak out in the same forceful way they used to. Their voices do not lead the chorus on public issues and controversies in the manner of the great presidents of the past, such as Woodrow Wilson, Derek Bok, Clark Kerr, Theodore Hesburgh and others (I suspect time and fading memory have enhanced all this a bit). Of course there are significant exceptions to such a generalization but, in the main, the public president speaks out on policy issues very carefully. Why? What has changed?

First: Vietnam. The wrenching and horribly fragmenting nature of that debacle (oops, there I go) politicized campuses in ways that we are still experiencing. Presidents were pushed to be outspoken, to lead the charge to the barricades, only to find some very unhappy trustees guarding the castle. One of the ironies was that silence was considered support of the war and earned one the wrath of most of the faculty and students anyway. This made presidents wary of policy issues and their double-edged nature.

Second: political correctness. The politicization of language has made it risky to even speak out in favor of a group or an issue. It was (is) a verbal minefield (for example, trace the history of the use of the word *tolerance*). I think there is merit in some of this; when I teach my class on American Government, I lean heavily on George Orwell to help students ponder the power of language. Still, it all has a silencing effect.

The presidency is not about me, my opinions and my view of the new world order. I consider it inappropriate to think I might somehow represent the political views of all the people who work and learn on our campus.

Third: careerism. Some time in the last 30 years or so, the professional academic administrative career emerged as a permanent career path. Or, as one of my friends said to me when I became an associate dean, “Now you are one of them.” I never looked back and have had a great time—and I still am. But to keep moving the institution ahead, it becomes important to be less controversial on campus and to have a lower political profile off campus. One develops a survivor strategy; you cannot change the university if you are on the street.

Fourth: managerial realities. Campuses are increasingly unionized, facing litigation at every turn, and bound up by rules, policies, procedures and governance documents. In this increasingly formal and legalistic environment, controversial public utterances can be viewed as bargaining in public, trying cases in public or prejudging issues. The president must be aware at all times of the risk-management impacts of his or her actions and words. This rational behavioral calculus often directs one to the more conservative option in a difficult situation.

Finally (although this list could be longer): economic imperatives. The governor and the legislature expect the university to be a partner in economic development. It doesn't matter if the prevailing party is Democrat or Republican, the university should be on board. If you are, resources and support might follow. If not, the university can be punished. The result is the need to be politically neutral on the issue of the day whether it is consolidation of school districts, landfills or the politics of creating casinos.

Yet the expectation from all quarters is that the public university president must work hard, facilitate change and progress, have strong values, act ethically, be courageous and make tough decisions. These are essential if one is to be an effective campus leader, to earn those “big bucks.” In the current era, one learns to do this more deftly in order to maintain a functional consensus on campus, generate support from external audiences and keep the university on track. Too much controversy saps energy, creates resistance to change and sometimes generates hostile opposition.

This balancing act is neither cynical nor cowardly. It can be done with great verve, integrity and decisiveness. It is a pragmatic stance, taken on behalf of the welfare

of the university. After all, the presidency is not about me, my opinions and my view of the new world order. I consider it inappropriate to think I might somehow represent the political views of all the people who work and learn on our campus. My job is to lead, prod, excite and push the university to a better future: higher quality, more efficient, more responsive, more diverse and better funded—and in the process to protect and guarantee its academic integrity. When people ask me what my job is, I always say, “To make the University of Southern Maine an even better university.”

When the day comes that I want to jump up on the bully pulpit and advocate clear and strong positions,

I will run for office or return full time to the faculty. Until then I will take seriously the responsibility of representing all the voices and views on campus, and to work as hard as I can to move this university forward on its journey towards our stated goal of “regional excellence, national recognition.” To do otherwise would abuse the opportunity I have been given and would undermine the broad stewardship responsibility that is inherent in the role of the 21st century public university president.

Richard Pattenau is president of the University of Southern Maine.

Declaring Independence

A New Model for Public Presidents

ROBERT L. CAROTHERS

Once again this past summer, leaders of public colleges and universities around the country were left scratching their heads, trying to figure out how best to fulfill their missions in the face of continuing disinvestment by the states. This has become a predictable part of July and August, a time we once used to catch up on our research and reading and maybe even get a few days by the lake. To the dismay of our spouses, children and grandchildren, those days are gone.

July starts like this: After months of bickering about too-high taxes and government waste, the state legislature finally adjourns amidst finger-pointing and rancor. The budget it has passed is not as bad as it looked in March, but the appropriation to higher education is still several percentage points below what we received last year. To compensate, our boards are now called back into session to set even higher tuition and fees than the increases they had announced earlier. The presidents and provosts start making cuts in the budgets they had promised the deans and face the angry parents and students who have just been notified that their bills for September will be several hundred dollars (or several thousand) higher than they thought they would be. Next comes the annual letter from the state budget office

requiring that next year’s budget request be no more than 90 percent of this year’s appropriation. By August, we are sitting in small, hot conference rooms, listening to our finance officers wailing in the growing darkness.

Clearly, as we said ad nauseum in the 1990s, the paradigm has shifted. The days when we could advance the cause by pointing to the rapid growth of America’s Knowledge Economy and higher education’s role in building the common good are over. As University of Maryland President C.T. Mote wrote recently in the *Washington Post*, the “personal benefit” model is now firmly established in the minds of both federal and state governments, complete with a reliance on staggering amounts of personal debt that has dramatically changed the decisions our students make about their lives and careers.

Today’s political leaders, governing boards and college and university presidents now need to get on with creating a new model for supporting our colleges and universities. As always, the people need a vision.

For 30 years now, I have listened to corporate leaders and politicians opine that our institutions should be run more like businesses—whatever that meant to them at the moment. What I know about successful businesses is that they bring ideas and capital together and take calculated risks based on a reasonable appraisal of the evolving marketplace. They leverage whatever resources they have, and they curse bureaucracies and regulators



of whatever origin. Today's businesses like to think of themselves as agile, quick to respond to change, moving from mass production to highly customized products and services. And while colleges and universities have survived for nearly a millennium using a very different model, our corporate colleagues seem to have carried the day.

It is hard to be agile when we are tied to archaic statewide purchasing and personnel systems set up to manage traditional state agencies, compensation rules that ignore the realities of the higher education marketplace and financial control systems well behind the contemporary realities of rapidly changing accounting standards.

So how will public colleges and universities adapt to a model in which they are expected to supply their own operating revenues while continuing to serve their states and nation for the greater public good? A few clues may be found.

The first is that the states have steadily increased their commitment to new and rehabilitated buildings and laboratories on public college campuses. In New England, the fabled \$1 billion investment called UConn 2000 and the subsequent billion three years later, has transformed the University of Connecticut, giving it the tools to both serve Connecticut and compete with some of the most prestigious universities in the country for well-prepared students, grants and gifts. At the University of Rhode Island, new residence halls, wonderful new science and business facilities, rehabilitated historic buildings and new athletic venues have set us on the same path.

A second is the creation of matching gift programs in many states, a strategy to bring in private dollars to state universities by demonstrating to potential but skeptical donors that their gifts will leverage state money, not replace it. These programs have great poten-

tial for building public university endowments that now lag far behind those of our sister institutions in the independent sector.

Finally, the states have been passing laws that allow university professors to build companies that commercialize the fruits of their research, with the universities themselves (or their foundations) holding equity positions in those companies, creating new revenue streams. Taken together, it looks like a plan.

But while the states have given us some new tools with which to toil in this fallen world, they continue to prevent us from functioning like modern business enterprises by maintaining and even tightening the bureaucratic controls left over from another time. It is hard to be agile when we are tied to things like the archaic statewide purchasing and personnel systems set up to manage traditional state agencies, compensation rules that ignore the realities of the higher education marketplace and financial control systems well behind the contemporary realities of rapidly changing accounting standards. More problematic yet are state budget regulations that inhibit planning beyond the current fiscal year and prevent the creation of the reserves necessary to ride out years like the past several or to save up for critical investments. The University of New Hampshire broke through this barrier several years ago, allowing UNH to implement "responsibility-based management" with great success. So should we all.

Today's leaders in higher education will have to abandon, however grudgingly, the defense of financial entitlement and instead shift their focus to gaining the financial and management independence required to maintain the viability of their institutions. In this campaign, we have natural allies among our alumni and advisory boards, who can grasp what would happen to their businesses if they were required to observe similar restrictions. We will all continue to ask "Where's the money?," but we will also understand that it is up to us to create it.

Robert L. Carothers is president of the University of Rhode Island.

Roads to the Presidency

Once upon a time, most college presidents were former academics. Now, they come from all walks of life, especially business and politics. A few New England examples:

- Berklee College of Music President Roger H. Brown is the former CEO of Bright Horizons Family Solutions, the childcare and early childhood development outfit.
- Wesleyan University President Doug Bennet was assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs in the Clinton administration and CEO of National Public Radio.
- Bowdoin College President Barry Mills was a partner in the New York City law firm of Debevoise & Plimpton.
- Southern New Hampshire University President Paul Leblanc is a former vice president of Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Harvard University President Lawrence H. Summers was U.S. secretary of the Treasury in the Clinton administration.
- Marlboro College President Elizabeth McCulloch-Lovell was executive director of President Clinton's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.
- Bryant University President Ronald K. Machtley was a U.S. congressman from Rhode Island.

Connecting Thought and Action

The Challenge for Liberal Arts Presidents

ELIZABETH COLEMAN



These are times of great stress and urgency for our nation and the world—the importance of an educated citizenry is ever more compelling. Our failures in this regard hardly need more documenting. What is encouraging is that complacency is increasingly being replaced by a sense that we need to move beyond business as usual. This is particularly relevant to the future of the liberal arts, which have always had a radical edge, a restlessness, a stubborn refusal to relinquish sky-high expectations.

In this climate, an overwhelming challenge for presidents of liberal arts colleges is to discover those ideas that have both the power to transform curriculum by getting people to think freshly and the capacity to generate the financial and human resources necessary for their implementation. Then there is the equally challenging task of design—how to go about translating ideas into action. Underlying all this is the ethos of the institution itself: is there a culture of innovation or of protecting the status quo? The president does not create this culture, but he or she can certainly influence it.

Developing and sustaining the habits of debate, openness and self-criticism while engaging substance of profound importance is the perpetual challenge facing liberal education. A liberal arts curriculum must make these two aspects inseparable—the depth, flexibility and openness of our thinking and the importance of what we are thinking about. Decades of professionalizing the disciplines, of emphasizing expertise as the sole form of intellectual prowess, of treating technical competence as the exclusive intellectual virtue have enabled us to avoid this challenge. Methodological sophistication—often referred to as *critical thinking skills*—is treated as if it is an end in itself, disconnected from the urgencies, passions and values associated with matters of substance. Where once the task of liberal education was thought to be the disciplining of our passions, it is now more akin to eliminating or neutralizing them.

To redress this imbalance is no simple matter. As the urgency of a subject intensifies, so does the potential for confusing ideas with ideology and of turning inquiry into advocacy. Achieving a continuum between thought and action has never been easy—on the academic side is the fear of diluting intellectual rigor matched on the practical side by the fear of paralysis. If anything, the increasing specialization and narrowing of academic disciplines over the past decades has deepened the divide. The failure to accommodate a reciprocal relationship between thinking and doing carries a high price. Academic rigor is increasingly reduced to technical competence, narrowness of focus and perpetuation of the status quo, while action is equated with mindless activity.

This dichotomizing is especially evident and especially costly in our attempts to address questions relating to civic education.

Despite a huge expenditure of effort and resources in recent decades, attempts to bolster civic values in colleges and universities through scores of community service programs have failed to influence curriculum. This is no small thing because the curriculum is where the most profound values of an education reside, creating a dangerous disconnect between what we say (proclaiming the great value of civic virtue) and what we do (wariness about exploring these values where it really counts). Work within the classroom remains “uncontaminated” by any serious engagement with efforts connected with civic responsibility, which in turn, tends to be limited to activities that are self-evidently virtuous.

This focus on activities whose value seems beyond question diminishes the need for students to wrestle intellectually with these choices, to deepen and enlarge their understanding of civic responsibility, or to address the huge challenge of connecting a commitment to activities associated with public virtue to the values and ambitions that shape the rest of their lives. Civic values are aggressively promoted, but in a context detached from those educational experiences most closely connected with one’s future intellectual and professional identity. In effect, we have institutionalized

the divide between intellectual and professional development on the one hand and civic responsibility on the other, between one's own interests and the interests of others, between youthful energy and idealism and adult responsibilities and realism.

Democracy Project

The Democracy Project at Bennington College addresses fundamental questions about the organization of curriculum and the stranglehold of the academic disciplines while it takes on issues related to the continuum between thought and action. For these reasons, not despite them, it is a project that is very likely to enhance the institution's access to resources, both human and financial.

We are witnessing a nearly universal interest in the possibilities of democracy accompanied by a great deal of debate and honest difference as to the means for achieving them. These differences have to do with profound variations in history, traditions, religions, social compacts and natural, human and financial resources. Understanding these differences is crucial, both in addressing the intolerable inequities that persist in established democratic societies like our own and in fostering the conditions that new democracies require to thrive. Moreover, the surge in efforts to realize in practice the ideals of democracy in remarkably divergent settings around the world is likely to define the history of the coming decades.

The Democracy Project makes democracy the animating principle of an area of concentration (or a major) with traditional academic disciplines entering insofar as they illuminate this subject rather than as ends in themselves. While no teaching strategy is foolproof, focusing the curriculum on democracy is especially compatible with the need to generate fusion among thought, passion and action. There is an indisputable urgency to this subject and it most certainly engages our passions. At the same time, conflict and dissent are its life-blood, making it particularly averse to the doctrinaire and the flight from thinking. Democracy's emphasis on mediating conflict gives it a quintessentially open-ended and intellectual cast. Plus, it has the remarkable characteristic of providing a rationale for seeing its own limitations no less than its strengths. Like the liberal arts at their best, a mix of restlessness, self-criticism and visionary possibilities replaces the hope of achieving fixed structures and the quest for ultimate truths.

The enormity of these issues is reason enough for democracy to assume a prominent position in a liberal arts college. Moreover, this great intellectual invention in its prior, current and potential configurations has the breadth and depth that can profitably engage an extra-

ordinary range of intellectual traditions—historical, philosophical, cultural, psychological, political and economic. It similarly engages the dialectical oppositions that have informed human efforts to comprehend human society—freedom and order; rich and poor; old and new; individual and society; familiar and strange; thought and action. The very inexhaustibility of the subject, daunting as it is, constitutes a strength in the context of an educational setting. There is ample room at the table for faculty and students with a wide diversity of interests, temperaments, proficiencies and objectives. In addition to providing a unity of focus while accommodating a virtually limitless diversity of interests, the study of democracy provides a context for bringing thought and action into fruitful interaction.

There are two additional concerns that this focus on democracy raises when the object is to fulfill the ambitions of a genuinely liberal education. One is parochialism and the other is complacency. With the recent expansion of democracy globally, a whole array of assumptions born of the American and the European experience about pre-conditions for democracy have lost their authority, to be replaced by more flexible and more dynamic analyses and a more global frame of reference. This transformation in our understanding of democracy precludes chauvinism, without diminishing the importance of the history and traditions of Europe and the United States. On the contrary, their role in effecting this global phenomenon adds yet another dimension to their value.

Finally, whatever values and accomplishments we attribute to democracy at any given moment, an informed view of its history makes the complacencies of the ideologue unthinkable. As Bronsilaw Gieremek, former foreign minister of Poland, reminds us: “[Democracy] is by no means a process that goes from triumph to triumph nor is it exempt from creating the very conditions that undermine it. On the contrary, the history of democracy is also a history of moral compromises, downfalls, economic crises and ‘flights from democracy’ in places it seemed to have sunk lasting roots. Democracies have had slaves and colonies, voted for Hitler and refused to die for Gdansk.”

The last several decades have made one thing clear: It will take fresh ways of addressing curriculum if the big questions are to resume a privileged position throughout the course of the undergraduate experience, not only in the broad introductory courses, and if we are to embed within the totality of our academic experience the urgencies and values of civic life. To confront this challenge does not make the job of a liberal arts college president easy; it is most certainly what makes it a very special privilege.

Elizabeth Coleman is president of Bennington College.

Why New Presidents Can't Sleep

JAMES MARTIN AND JAMES E. SAMELS

Many new college and university presidents across New England are not sleeping well this fall. The job is not what they thought it would be, and a growing number of them are choosing to step down earlier than their predecessors.

The presidential “honeymoon” has disappeared from most campuses. Once, new campus leaders were afforded a grace period during which the institutional community forgave a pause in decision-making or a decision that failed to account for a key political consideration, constituency or aspect of institutional history. Now, smaller, resource-stretched schools cannot afford even a brief period of presidential uncertainty, much less inactivity. Presidents at larger institutions likely never experienced that now anachronistic element of the presidency.

JoAnn Gora, who left the University of Massachusetts Boston earlier this year to become the first female leader of an Indiana public university, Ball State, offers a stark view of the presidential honeymoon: “Presidents expecting honeymoons should dust off their wedding albums; it is a word, and a concept, disappearing from our lives. The first thing new presidents are asked, even before arriving on campus, is, ‘What is your plan?’ Effective leaders should be very careful about talking about any ‘plan’ until they have demonstrated respect for the new community by taking the time to learn firsthand about its opportunities and challenges.”

Gora’s view reflects the passing of a slower period of higher education management when chief executive officers were hired for their potential and expected to receive much of their training on the job.

Today, an unforgiving set of expectations is swiftly placed on new presidents—often before their first day on campus—by students, faculty and, most commonly, trustees. Kevin Sayers, former senior research analyst at Brown University and now vice president for institutional research and effectiveness at Capital University, says even presidents who are very skilled at planning “are growing restless in their efforts and weary of the burdensome demands of institutional and program accreditors; as a result, many leaders are becoming unable to move their colleges beyond relatively simple day-to-day decision-making to much-needed long-range forecasting.”

This past summer, Vicky L. Carwein began her tenure as president of Westfield State College. As her leadership team works to boost Westfield’s profile and attractiveness in the metro Boston and New York markets, she offers this view of her first weeks as a state college president: “National economic stresses, includ-

ing a steady decline in state support for public higher education, have led to two increasing pressures on New England college presidents: a focus on private fundraising and an emphasis on greater accountability via value-added outcomes of teaching and learning. Within what seems like only weeks, new presidents will need to raise significant private dollars, to quantify their institution’s successes and to anticipate what the next benchmarks will be—all while remaining committed to mission and integrity.”

After the new president arrives, it is often not long before the board chair suggests, in so many words, “clear your desk, focus the institution and complete a strategic planning cycle immediately.” Younger presidents, in particular, need to discover for themselves that strategic planning has become more complicated than it was a generation ago in part because of the louder calls for accountability from almost all constituents involved in the planning process. Many presidents experience extremely narrow margins for error with their planning goals under the microscope at weekly trustee meetings.

In his first year as president of Roxbury Community College, Terrence Gomes faced a strategic abyss. The college had not implemented a major strategic plan in a good number of years despite several planning exercises. Gomes immediately focused on a new way to think about planning both effectively and rapidly at Roxbury by working with the community to articulate its most important “core values.” As he described it, “I found it important to spend my time creating a new climate across the campus and in building a strong platform on which effective strategic planning and its accompanying timelines could begin. Thus, community members entered the process at Roxbury realizing that a realistic timeframe for implementation in their areas was a critical aspect of the plan itself.”

These causes of presidential night sweats could be matched by three, six, or even nine more of almost equal intensity this fall, as many of New England’s new presidents struggle quietly, perhaps painfully, to move their institutions forward in the country’s most competitive higher education marketplace.

James Martin is a professor of English at Mount Ida College and academic vice president of the Education Alliance, a higher education consulting firm based in Framingham, Mass. *James E. Samels* is president and CEO of the Education Alliance. They are authors of *Presidential Transition in Higher Education: Managing Leadership Change* (Johns Hopkins University Press, September 2004).